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DE RUEHAS #0904/01 1781008
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
P 271008Z JUN 07
FM AMEMBASSY ALGIERS
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 3908
INFO RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 1656
RUEHNM/AMEMBASSY NIAMEY 1228
RUEHNK/AMEMBASSY NOUAKCHOTT 5968
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 2233
RUEHRB/AMEMBASSY RABAT 1818
RUEHTU/AMEMBASSY TUNIS 6659
RUEPGBA/CDR USEUCOM INTEL VAIHINGEN GE
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RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L ALGIERS 000904

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STATE FOR NEA; DS/IP/NEA, DS/ITA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/27/2017

TAGS: [ASEC](#) [CASC](#) [PTER](#) [AG](#)

SUBJECT: MOKHTAR BELMOKHTAR AND AQIM: IS ONE-EYE ON HIS
LAST LEG?

REF: ALGIERS 896

Classified By: Ambassador Robert S. Ford for the reasons
1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. The Salafist Group for Preaching and Combats (GSPC) transition to al-Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) aggravated existing leadership splits within the organization (ref). Recent Algerian press reports claimed that GSPC southern region leader Mokhtar Belmokhtar was seeking a deal with the government to allow him to retire and live peacefully in Mali. Algerian journalists who track AQIM issues believe the reports and assert that Belmokhtar's stature within GSPC/AQIM has diminished. Local journalists say that Belmokhtar does not support AQIM's tactics and as a result AQIM leader Abdelmalek Droukdal, who is in northern Algeria, has isolated Belmokhtar from AQIM activities. Other sources reason that Belmokhtar has not made a clean break from AQIM because he does not want to provoke Droukdal to attack him. In any case, the extent of Belmokhtar's involvement in current AQIM operations and leadership is increasingly unclear. End Summary.

THE GSPC'S HEYDAY

¶2. (U) According to several Algerian press reports, Mokhtar Belmokhtar (aka "one-eye") was born July 1, 1972 in Ghardaia. He became a soldier in the Algerian army. After gaining military experience -- and losing an eye -- in Afghanistan, he returned to southern Algeria and joined a smuggling ring that eventually became part of the GSPC. Our journalist contacts characterize Belmokhtar as a smuggler and racketeer first and foremost, profiting from trafficking arms and contraband from Mali and Niger into Algeria.

¶3. (U) According to El Watan journalist Salima Tlemcani, who has covered terrorism issues in Algeria for many years and has excellent contacts within the Algerian security establishment, Belmokhtar's partnership with fellow Afghanistan returnee Amari Saifi (aka Abderezzak al-Para) gave the two GSPC leaders control of southern Algeria. Tlemcani says that with help from Belmokhtar, al-Para carried out the 2003 kidnapping of 32 foreigners that garnered a windfall USD6.5-million ransom for GSPC and increased their stature within the organization. On June 23, author and newspaper editor Hmida Ayachi, considered by most here to be

the foremost Algerian expert on Islamist extremists, asserted that Belmokhtar's marital union with at least one Malian Tuareg woman brought him loyalty from Tuareg clans that reside near the Mali-Algeria border and secured his smuggling business.

¶4. (C) Liberte journalist Mounir Boudjema, who closely follows GSPC and AQIM issues and also has good Algerian security contacts, told PolOff June 24 that al-Para's 2004 capture by Chadian rebels started a decline in his ally Belmokhtar's leverage within GSPC. Boudjema said that Belmokhtar, like al-Para, is still considered one of the senior members of AQIM, even though al-Para remains in Algerian custody. According to Boudjema, Belmokhtar has been hiding out in GSPC Zone 9 (Sahara/Sahel) for more than a year. Tlemcani, Boudjema and Ayachi all agreed that it appears that Belmokhtar pays AQIM to allow him to continue his smuggling business. Hmida Ayachi approximated that Belmokhtar had only 50 GSPC members who remain loyal to him; other contacts thought the figure might be a little higher but none of our contacts had any hard information.

DIFFERENCES WITH AQIM LEADER

¶5. (C) Echouroug el-Yomi on June 13 noted that in 1997 Belmokhtar issued a statement emphasizing his adherence to Islamist Sunni Salafi principles and goals. He also denounced massacres of civilians in Algeria undertaken by Takfiris linked to the Armed Islamic Group (GIA). On June 21 well-informed Echouroug journalist Moqadam told us that Belmokhtar does not agree with AQIM tactics that have justified the killing of civilians. The Algerian author Ayachi in his June 24 conversation with us agreed with Moqadam's analysis, saying the marriage between Belmokhtar and AQIM was very shaky on ideological grounds.

¶6. (C) On June 17 the small French-language paper La Depeche de Kabylie issued a written statement purportedly from Belmokhtar. In it Belmokhtar reaffirmed his dedication to ex-GSPC leader Hassan al-Hattab for harshly criticizing the April 11 suicide car bomb attacks in Algiers. Belmokhtar emphasized that al-Hattab was a leader who deserved a fighter's respect and that his friendship with al-Hattab went back to the days of working with al-Para in Morocco, Mali, Niger and Chad. (Comment: Hattab and Droukdal are bitterly at odds over AQIM tactics, including the April 11 suicide bombings in Algiers that killed several dozen civilians. The Depeche de Kabylie is another hint of differences between Belmokhtar and Droukdal. End Comment.)

BELMOKHTAR QUITTING THE FIGHT ?

¶7. (C) On June 17, Tlemcani told PolOff that Belmokhtar had used family members to contact GOA security services to try to broker a deal for him to "repent" under the 2005 Charter of National Reconciliation. Echouroug el-Yomi journalist Mohamed Muqadam (whose pen name Anis Rahmani and who knows various GSPC families) recounted a similar story to use June ¶21. According to a June 13 article in Echouroug el-Youmi, Belmokhtar gave the Algerian authorities the following conditions:

- Immunity from prosecution for himself and three aides (names of which he would submit at a later date);
- Permission to settle unhampered in northern Mali;
- An Algerian passport, on the condition that he reside with Barabsha tribe in Mali, his wife's tribal zone;
- Guarantee that no harm would come to his family and that his property would not be confiscated; and
- Assistance to keep his group unified and unharmed, noting that they are spread throughout the desert.

Muqadam also told us that Belmokhtar wanted a deal because he fears an attack against him by Droukdal. For this reason, Muqadam asserted, Belmokhtar has refused to travel outside his zone in the Mali/Algerian border area.

¶8. (C) By contrast, author Hmida Ayachi opined to us that Belmokhtar's purported deal was a disinformation story manufactured by Algerian military intelligence (the DRS). Ayachi claimed that Belmokhtar had called him personally at his office at Al Djazair News this spring to dispel rumors that he was seeking amnesty.

¶9. (C) On June 24, Liberte's Boudjema told PolOff that both the purported Belmokhtar amnesty deal and the denials made logical sense. He explained that an established smuggler like Belmokhtar would want to have as many options as possible available to him. According to Boudjema's sources, Belmokhtar did try and negotiate a deal. At the same time, denying the effort allowed Belmokhtar to avoid reprisals from Droukdal. On June 25, L'Expression journalist Ikram Ghioua told PolOff that Belmokhtar sought a deal because he had himself become an AQIM target.

COMMENT

¶10. (C) As we noted reftel, digging out the truth about AQIM and its GSPC elements is exceptionally difficult, especially with the Algerian military intelligence disinformation efforts thrown in. This is art, not science. That said, our contacts all characterize Belmokhtar as more of a smuggler than an ideological warrior; more of an opportunist and bandit rather than a jihadi. Belmokhtar's publicly declared allegiance to ex-GSPC leader Hassan al-Hattab further puts him at odds with AQIM leader Droukdal. Belmokhtar's reported recent offer to stop fighting the GoA -- something that does appear to have occurred -- suggests that he is not particularly close to the AQIM leadership in northern Algeria that is most involved in the terrorist attacks plaguing Algeria. Even if he is not close to AQIM, an opportunist like Belmokhtar might decide there are times when it is in his immediate interest to help AQIM - but he probably weighs each instance carefully.

FORD